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SUBJECT: MUMBAI GOES TO THE POLLS ON FEBRUARY 1

Summary

1. (SBU) Residents of Mumbai and several other cities in Maharashtra will go to the polls on Feb. 1 to elect the 277 members of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), the city's main municipal body. As in the past, the urban poor, swayed by opportunistic politicians who deliver the pork shortly before the election, will come out to vote, whereas higher income groups will mostly avoid the polls, turned off by the corruption and mismanagement that characterizes the BMC and many of the city's leading politicians. Several urban groups and the city's media are calling for the middle and upper income classes to vote to change the political culture of the city, yet it remains to be seen whether such voters will actually respond to these initiatives. A shift in thinking about the city is noticeable, however, as more of the city's middle and upper classes become dissatisfied with a decrepit urban environment that is not improving in tandem with the material improvements of their personal lives. It is too early, however, for such a trend to find its way into the election results, which remain unpredictable. The BJP/Shiv Sena "saffron alliance" that has controlled the BMC for the last 15 years is struggling to cope with successive leadership crises. Many observers expected a Congress/NCP alliance to easily come to power, yet bickering between the two parties will likely divide their electoral base and indirectly strengthen BJP/Shiv Sena. Communal and caste parties hope to capitalize on the universal dissatisfaction towards all established political parties, yet most observers do not expect them to make much of an impact. The elections will also test, for the first time, former Shiv Sena wunderkind Raj Thackeray's ability to establish a foothold in the city's politics. End summary.

Mumbai Votes On February 1

2. (SBU) All 277 seats in the BMC are up for election on February 1. Although authority to deliver municipal services in Mumbai is divided among more than a dozen agencies, many of which are controlled by the state and central governments, the BMC is considered to be a crucially important entity, as it controls one of the largest municipal budgets in the country. In the sordid history of Mumbai's politics, many BMC members

have not viewed the BMC budget as a tool to service the city's population, but rather as a vehicle for political patronage and outright corruption. The BMC is the lead agency for delivering the city's most basic services such as road maintenance, water supply, and sewage removal, the purses of which offer many opportunities for political patronage and graft. Although BMC members receive only a modest honorarium, many past members have grown wealthy in these positions, and thousands of candidates are expected to compete. Political parties also view the city's budget as a war chest to finance future state and national elections.

A Political Shake-Up?

13. (SBU) Until recently, most analysts believed that Congress and the National Congress Party (NCP), the so-called "secular parties," had a good chance to win control of the BMC for the first time in 15 years. Both sides of the governing BJP/Shiv Sena "saffron alliance" are beset with leadership problems, and the parties are considered to be weaker than they have been in many years. Raj Thackeray, the nephew of Shiv Sena leader Balsaheb Thackeray, has formed his own political party and will likely act as a spoiler in the elections. (The difficulties faced by the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance and the role of Raj Thackeray will be addressed in septel.) Interlocutors agree that Congress and the NCP will need to cooperate in order to capitalize fully on the BJP/Sena weakness. That cooperation has not been visible, however. Both NCP and Congress have bickered over the number of candidates that each party should field. As a result, the two sides recently announced that their seat-sharing talks had failed, and each will contest the elections independently. This failure to reach an agreement will almost certainly split the secular vote and has provided a major boost to the rival BJP-Sena alliance. While previously

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most observers were predicting a Congress-NCP victory, this outcome is now much less certain. Whatever the outcome, however, most observers think that NCP and Congress will continue to cooperate at the state and national levels.

14. (SBU) Congress and NCP hope to capitalize on Mumbai voters' clear and growing frustration with the BMC. In the last few years Mumbai has experienced flooding, terrorist bombings, increased traffic that has begun to paralyze commercial life in the city, and a seeming lack of progress on many high-profile infrastructure projects. The BMC's inadequate response to these problems has led to increased allegations of corruption and incompetence. Voters seem ready to assign blame to the governing BJP/Sena coalition, but Congress and NCP will have to fight off their own records of corruption and ineffectiveness at the Maharashtra state level. Congress claims that winning control of the BMC will allow it to obtain assistance from the state and national legislatures that it already controls, as well as coordinate more effectively between the many city and state agencies that make up Mumbai's government. Most observers agree that the stalemate between the Sena-controlled BMC and Congress/NCP-controlled state government has contributed to the lack of progress in upgrading the city's services.

A Third Front

15. (SBU) Many traditional supporters have their own gripes with Congress and NCP. Dalit groups have expressed frustration with rapes and killings that hit their own in rural India last September. Muslims have expressed anger over the handling of official inquiries into terrorist attacks and the lack of progress in other high profile cases. Anant Gadgil from the Congress Party told poloff that many Muslims had expressed dismay about Congress' increasingly close relationship with the U.S. Gadgil said he was concerned about Muslim voters' anger over the Indian-US Nuclear agreement and the Saddam Hussein execution. Bharatkumar Raut, editor of the Maharashtra Times, dismissed these concerns, however, saying that Muslims' anger

with Congress stemmed from a perceived lack of support on domestic issues like the reservation of parliament seats, educational opportunities and government jobs for Muslims. Raut told poloff that he feels the political mobilization of Dalits and Muslims is a "silent revolution" that is not receiving the coverage in the media that it deserves. He pointed to the unexpectedly large rally in South Mumbai that occurred last March in response to President Bush's India visit as an example of the unnoticed strength of these groups.

¶6. (SBU) Although both Dalits and Muslims are traditional supporters of Congress, many party leaders have expressed nervousness that these groups will not support the party as strongly this election. Several Muslim and Dalit political parties have attempted to form a "Third Front" coalition that consists of the (Dalit) Republican Party of India (RPI), the (Muslim) Samajwadi Party, and 19 other parties. This coalition, which calls itself the "Mumbai Vikas Secular Front" is positioning itself to be an alternative to the other alliances, but it too has become bogged down in squabbling over seat-sharing, with even marginal parties demanding lots of seats. Analysts say these broad coalitions have not been durable in the past, but Raut suggests that even if the coalition fails, the increased cooperation between unaffected Muslims and Dalits could cause headaches for Congress.

¶7. (SBU) Poloff spoke with Ravi Bhilane, editor, and Anil Pawar, executive director, at the Dalit newspaper "Mahanayak," and they confirmed that there is deep dissatisfaction with Congress and NCP among the Dalit population. They said that Dalits are perpetually disappointed by these parties in terms of actually fulfilling their campaign promises and said that leaders of traditional Dalit parties like RPI are usually bought out by Congress. Pawar said that the most authentic political party of the Dalits is now the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), but that few in the media recognize this, instead focusing on the actions of RPI. They acknowledged that the BSP may not win any seats, (which they blamed on careful redistricting designed to divide the Dalit vote,) but suggested that it will nonetheless give the Dalits a political voice and identity, which they described as

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vitaly important to this population, even more than delivery of basic services like water and sanitation.

Additional Challenges Facing Congress-NCP

¶8. (SBU) Congress also has internal rivalries that may complicate matters. Former Shiv Sena leader Narayan Rane was a high-profile defector to Congress in 2005 and helped the party make substantial gains in state by-elections. Some analysts feel that a Congress victory in the BMC polls will consolidate Rane's power and create a strong internal rival to Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, who may be secretly hoping against a Congress win for this reason. Rane will face his own pressures from having to reward several former Sena members who defected with him to Congress. The recent arrivals are viewed suspiciously by many of the Congress rank-and-file, and the resulting tension with local Congress boss Gurudas Kamat may cause problems. Congress and NCP leaders are also nervous that the BJP and Shiv Sena will instigate communal flare-ups as a way to rally their base.

Are the Middle and Upper Classes Beginning to Care?

¶9. (SBU) About sixty percent of the city's population live either in areas designated as slums, or on the street. Traditionally, these groups have turned out to vote in Mumbai. Middle and upper-middle class voters have shown little interest in BMC affairs, not bothering to vote or even to learn the identity of their representative. The urban poor have long served politicians as "vote banks." Many of Mumbai's large slums are actually highly organized urban organisms, with key community leaders being able to sway large numbers of people.

Politicians discovered long ago that a few supporters in key positions in the city's slums can organize large numbers of voters and get out the vote. To secure the support of the urban poor, politicians have delivered tangible services such as water wells, toilets, or electrical power to slums shortly before elections or have resorted to outright bribery, paying slum dwellers directly to show up on election day.

¶10. (SBU) Such antics have alienated the better-off sections of the city's population, who have watched in disgust as local politics degenerated into a populist carnival for the poor, organized by corrupt and often criminal politicians who do little for the broader good of the city. This may be changing now, however. Siddharth Bhatia, an editor at the Mumbai newspaper DNA, told poloff that "the story" of the 2007 elections is the increased civic activism found among voters. Many analysts say that because of rising incomes and the recent high-profile disasters in the city, middle class voters are taking a renewed interest in Mumbai's affairs. Several citizens have started NGOs to improve the governance of the city. The Association for Governance and Networking in India (AGNI) and the Association for Democratic Reform (ADR) are working to boost middle class voter turnout. In addition, AGNI is attempting to publicize candidates' qualifications by creating a five star rating system for corruption and good governance that they intend to distribute through print and electronic media. The Indian news network NDTV reports that as many as 20 percent of this year's candidates have some form of criminal record. In the last election the average margin of victory for the 277 BMC wards was less than 1000 votes, and 10 wards were decided by less than 100 votes. This suggests that efforts to publicize the candidates' qualifications could affect the election's outcome.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) None of our interlocutors expects that the outcome of the BMC elections will have a noticeable impact on regional or national politics in the near to mid-term. A Congress/NCP victory, however, will accelerate the demise of the once-mighty Shiv Sena party. It may also reveal just how much potential Raj Thackeray has in the city's and the state's politics in the future. Most importantly, however, it may signal the beginning of a new political culture in the city if, in fact, the city's

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mid- and high-income groups begin to vote in higher numbers than in the past. It may be too early for these groups to actually express their frustration through the ballot box. A shift in thinking about the city is noticeable, however, as more of the city's middle and upper classes become dissatisfied with a decrepit urban environment that is not improving in tandem with the material improvements of their personal lives, but is actually getting worse. End comment.

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